

LEPER KINGS

by

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Abstract

This project is the first portion of the novel *Leper Kings*. Frank Nash, a bank robber and historical figure from the jazz age Midwest, is struggling to launch his criminal career and find his place in history. A series of his confidants and cronies records his attempts to gain money and notoriety through violence, only to find that Nash has the uncanny ability to propel them forward through time and into visions of the American future through a carefully manipulated series of robberies, assaults, and murders. Nash, aware that he is destined to die in the Kansas City Union Station Massacre of 1933, desperately seeks ways to launch his associates Lucas Mooney and Vernon Miller further into the future, beyond Nash's death, to experience and catalogue violent events that press increasingly into our present age. As their methods of soothsaying become gradually more reprehensible, Miller and Mooney question their chrono-magical project and find that their volatile leader and prophet, Frank Nash, is slowly and steadily losing his hold on the present reality and those in it.

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Chapter 1 - The Book of Humpy Wortman

“Jellybean Strikes a Path”

The thing to remember here is all of these men are more or less dead. Nollie Wortman was on the less-dead side of things looking downwards. He pressed two hands on a split-open stomach exit wound unfolding just below the right side of his rib cage. Suddenly he could smell himself, which seemed important, and after a good bit of deliberation and heat leaking into his hands, he said “Ow” and slowly sat down on the sweet overturned earth, Indian-style. In front of him was a half-dug hole, the culprit shovel jammed into dry ground, and a thousand dollars of stolen cash stuffed in a leather briefcase. Behind him was a gloamy Oklahoma sunset, roughly two colors and growing slowly down into the grasses. Nollie grunted and saw a fortress of thunderclouds coming in from the Southwest. “In a ditch,” he said. “In a ditch I half-dug all myself. Suppose I could have guessed. Suppose I should have.” A guttural rope of rolling thunder shook its way through the hills.

Of course: behind him, Frank Nash, and in front, a hole.

Nollie, when he was on the lesser, arguably least dead side of things, pretty often felt a similar sort of rock-splitting noise spread across his chest, one he could hear echoing onward; mostly it came on when he was looking down. When it got like that, he used to rub his sternum, sometimes till the flesh ran red with irritation. He pawed at himself thusly time to time for all of his life, but never so bad as that day, early on, when he was ten years old, far as he could figure. It was June and humid and the best thing for it was to spend the hotter hours right after noon in one of the creeks round where he lived, back in Hobart, rolling around, throwing stones, lying out on the big washed-out rocks in the middle of the stream, fingering the slime of mosses and watching the day melt away. Sometimes they’d march along, feeling out the creekbed barefoot,

going for hours and hours till they reckoned they'd walked right out of Kiowa County. They'd chew honeysuckle, name and claim each passing landmark, track beavers and raccoons through clay and mud like the natives they knew they were at heart. They smeared wet earth on their chests and danced. They made all that heat their own.

But they had to venture further, reach those higher peaks, and that came foremost with the advent of Frank "Jellybean" Nash, a wiry kid, all nose and slick hair—his pap bought him his own can of beeswax pomade since he was eight—a natural-born prophet sprung right up from the land. Upon the summer he first arrived, the expeditions soon switched to his hands; they trekked farther, marched greener, tracked out into fields, catching burrs and grasshoppers along the way, always coming back to the creeks with cuts all up and down their legs that needed washing in the tepid water. Sometimes they'd strip down naked and lie out on top of exposed, flattened rocks in the sun to see who could stand it the longest. Come Nash, Nollie learned the nudeness of other boys, and of girls too a la young Miss Mayhew, back when she wasn't so much a Miss but the toughest-skinned of the lot, to the point where no one bothered race her, cuss her, or mud wrestle her until Nash showed up; she had him flipped and pinned flat, choking in the clay within ten seconds. From there, Nash learned just to play his dapper tongue, his greasy knowledge, and walk behind the overgrown shoulders of boys like Nollie, to guide Mayhew's knuckled claws. A pointed guy.

Nash always knew of the next daring place, and their journeys wound up taking them out south to the bridge where the tracks passed the green, deep water. It was the realm of older kids, passed down by one of his kin to Nash on a day when they knew none of them would be around sipping whiskey and skinnydipping. Nash and Nollie and crew walked along the tracks and felt the sun come up from them doubled and metallic, way outside town. That day it was Mayhew

and Nollie up front, a rail to themselves each, Nash stumbling along behind Nollie and the Lewis twins bitching each other to bits behind all that. They'd lapse into late summer quiet, and then someone would remember to pester their destination out of Nash. "Come on," Mayhew'd say, "just give it up already. Where you taking us out to, Jelly?" Each time, Nash would redouble his concentration on the shimmering rails and say: "We're marching right out to the end of the world today, soldiers. Hup two three four."

Naturally Nollie was the first to scramble down the little ravine by a slope that was slick with some sort of black rock like basalt and busted-up shards of sandstone. He put one foot down slow while holding onto a root, and the whole cliff seemed to come apart, lurching and scraping all the way down maybe forty, fifty feet. Nollie disappeared in a cloud of dust, and four other bodies came hissing and scraping down after him—a Lewis twin slammed into his shoulder, shouting, and skittered off to get banged up and bloody on one of the bigger basalt boulders. They all laughed and chewed the salty crackle of dust that settled into their mouths.

The creek looked even fuller and greener than up top, and they could make out a deep, blue thumbprint in the middle like someone had spilled a bucket of paint into the water. The water was slow-moving and cooler than the creeks they'd grown used to. No wonder it was the regular swimming hole, so long as you had the time or even the truck to haul yourself out south for the afternoon. The bridge itself seemed ancient, the metal all rusted over and the wooden support poles grown slimy and black with years of floodwaters and algae and stagnant pools when the flow got backed up downstream. The supports cast shadows that flickered out on the water, and the heat came off the top, from the rails, in little waves. All of a sudden it seemed insane a train could pass over a few logs roped up with out-of-date metal beams. One look and Nollie shuddered.

“Well that’s one way to do it,” Nollie said, nodded to the dissipating dust of their tumble, and shook dirt out of his hair. “How about getting back up?”

“You trap us down here, Nash?” said Lewis the younger, the second twin to see daylight, the bloodied one looking like a slab of shale himself—jagged, thinly fragile, and skippable. Billy. “You going to kill us and eat us? That why they kicked you out of Illinois?” Billy said.

“Indiana. No. Shut up.” Nash pointed across the creek where angled slivers ran up and down the clay. “There’s a path the older kids use to get up to the bridge over there that’s easy enough. Figure I’ll use it after I hide all the evidence.”

Nollie went over to the water and stuck his foot in. The dirt came off quick and swam away like brown clouds. He fixed his fist underneath the sun and reckoned the rest of the day, maybe four or five hours of light—plenty of time for swimming.

“Now here’s the plan,” Nash said. “Since Mayhew’s the fastest climber, she’s going to run up there and post right in the center of the bridge there—”

“I ain’t,” Mayhew said.

Lewis the elder, the thicker, the unstricken, name of Dick, said: “Mayhew don’t usually climb.”

“The hell you mean she don’t usually climb,” Nash said.

“I ain’t doing it and I won’t say another word and if you ask me about it, I’ll kill you, Frank Nash. I’d rather tear out your eyeballs than climb up top that dang bridge.” She folded arms over the beginnings of breasts, something she just figured out was worth hiding. “Now give me that dapper slick so I can grease up my hair like Chief McIntyre.” Nash snorted and obliged, and Mayhew found herself a big flat basalt stone in the shade of the tracks and started smearing her hair upwards like a diseased bird.

“Well shit,” Nash said and nodded at the Lewis boys. “Dick and Billy, you two are my diving crew. What I need you to do is wade out in the water over towards the blue there where it’s deepest and dive down with your feet first. Use your arms to flap yourself down there if you have to, but go as deep as you can. You touch bottom, then you wade out further till you find me a safe spot where you can’t reach, and then I need you to swim there for a bit so we can get our eyes on where the clear places are.” Nash grabbed Elder Dick by the shoulder and shook him lightly. “You swear on your sweet mom that you’ll tell me if you touch the bottom of that creek. I ain’t dying in Oklahoma.”

“I swear.”

“Billy?”

“On my sweet, sweet mama,” he said and thumped his chest. Elder Lewis gave him an elbow in the stomach, and they cussed their way out into the water.

“Now, Nollie, you’re with me. We have to be the explorers, take the first dive and test the waters. My sister says to me if you just make sure to jump out and forward there’s not a thing to worry about. Now take off your shoes—it’s nothing but mud on the other side.”

Nollie Wortman did as he was told and peeled off his shoes and then his shirt and laid them flat out on a rock to get warm in the sun. The gravel and shrapnel rocks below were daggers at first, but after they waded themselves out a bit, they could feel it give way to the thick, cool slippery mix of sand and clay that collected on the bottoms of deep creeks. Swimming out in the cool deep bits, Nollie couldn’t help but wonder how Nash had slipped ahead of the group since he’d come to town no more than a month ago. Lewis boys, sure, anybody could boss them around without any trouble, but what about Mayhew, pigheaded Mayhew? She probably would’ve clawed any other boy’s eyes out that asked a question straight and pointed as Nash had

back on the rocks, but all she did was put herself in the shade, quiet and content. And Nollie himself—sure his size had accounted for most of his natural leadership, but he'd scrapped his way up, captured enough flags, wrestled his way into a position of respect like any kid ought to. But Nash was the type to grab you by the elbow and lead you along while he talked, like an adult explaining something softly. Like a preacher. He'd talk you down into a hole and you didn't realize it until you were looking up at him blocking the sun from your eyes. Always talking. He worked sometimes in his pop's hotels, running errands for people, sitting in the lobby and fetching papers, drinks, beers, favors, and most of all, keeping secrets. Nollie'd only been to Nash's pop's hotel one time, but he found Nash propped up in a wicker chair, hands folded in his lap and eyes shot down at a point on the floor only he could see, but there was some sort of hum to his eyes, like they would make a sound if you got close enough, and his ears twitched now and again like a cat's. He sat stark still, but Nollie knew that kid heard every single thing going on in that hotel when he sat like that—a spider napping, letting the bugs writhe under its feet. If there was anything Nash was better at than talking, it was listening, and listening to the things you didn't want him to hear.

When did Nollie fall in line? He swam faster and dragged his way up the bank to be the first up to the tracks, Nash dripping and huffing behind him. "You sure your sis wasn't just yanking your chain?" Nollie said, looking down the ravine and seeing just how blue that water was from up on the tracks.

"She done it loads of times," Nash said. He made sure to slick his hair back slow and smooth. "Go in the bushes over there and I bet you dig up ten or so beer bottles. They come out here all the time. Speaking of which, don't step on no glass and cut yourself." Nash blew snot out his nose and leapt up on the rail, arms wide. "Now come on."

They took their time getting out in the middle, Nollie working from tie to tie with his big heels and Nash slipping along on top the rail and looking at the tracks going on across the plains. Sometimes Nollie would look down and lose his perception, get sick in his head, trying to figure out the real distance between railroad and water. Sometimes the creek seemed to rise above the tracks and reach for his throat. He'd fight the dizzy clutch and take a step, two more, counting them in his head till they made it far enough out. Nollie did his best to line up with the twins shouting below them and sat down on the rail, with each foot perched on a tie. He leaned out, stomach crunched, elbows hooked to the inside of his knees.

"Boys," Nash shouted, "we clear down there?"

"Safe as could be," one hollered; they were identical blond, dripping messes at that height. The other rose up and planted his palms on his brother's shoulders, dragging him under in mock drowning, and Nollie watched the bubbles and wiggled his toes off the ends of the two ties. It looked calmer up top where the wind ruffled the water like grasses and the banks breathed with the waves from the Lewis boys' shenanigans. But that dizzying clutch had relocated to his gut; he felt like slipping outwards and over the edge, even though he was firm in place, white knuckles clutching the rail, feet squarely planted. The height wanted to pull him over, and the longer he looked, the more he wanted it to happen. It was a sweet thing, the suicidal tendencies of precipices. Something took him in the chest, some kind of humming that grew to a rumble, and before long he found himself rubbing away at the skin on his breastbone, rubbing it red and raw in the sun while his damp clothes stuck to his skin. The thunder was coming. Should he get a running start? Should he shift down to the ties, plant his feet on the rusted-out supports below and kick off?

Nash put a hand on his shoulder, and Nollie shuddered. That's when he heard the train call. Some other kind of thunder.

"Well, Nollie," Nash said and sat next to him on the rail. "It's a whole different world up here now, isn't it?" A wind came across their cool, sticky skin. The train was coming in pretty quick, no doubt blowing through town like all the others. It seemed quicker as Nollie looked down the barrel of it. "One foot, each tie," Nash said, putting his heels on two, "just like this. Then all you have to do is kick off real hard and aim for where the boys are out wading down below. Can't be that hard."

Nollie took his shot. "How about I jump first and you can watch how I do it?" he said.

Nash stood up and folded his arms across a bony chest. "Tell you what, Nollie: let's make this interesting. How about the last to jump off this bridge before the train comes is boss from here on out."

"What are you talking about, Frank?"

"I seen you staring at me, Nollie," Nash said, smiling. "Like a hungry dog with a question. You been trying to figure out what I'm doing here since the day I came to town. Well this settles it—winner is the leader of the gang, calls the shots, where we go, what we do. King of the town, Lord of Hobart, once and evermore."

Nollie watched the water leap with a breeze down below. "That's stupid," he said and stood up, folding his thicker arms over a thicker chest, though Nash had a few years on him. The scrawny kid's form was growing bigger as the train loomed up behind him, screaming. Nash was bigger than the train, than the bridge, than the little river, than little Hobart, and with steam billowing behind his head, he looked fit to tear it all down. Too big to say no to. So Nollie did the next best thing: steadied a wobbling hand and filled himself to the brim with braggadocio.

“Okay,” he said, trying not to look at the train. “Well, you’d best go ahead and jump now—save yourself the trouble.”

Nash offered a hand. Nollie shook it, quick.

They planted their feet heavy and firm and eyed the water down below. The bridge was starting to vibrate with the oncoming train, squealing in places Nollie wished it wouldn’t. The whole thing could come down, rusty wet and sharp, and kill every last one of them, and for good measure, cars and cars of cattle or coal would smash down on their torn-up bodies one by one, boom, boom, boom. Nollie felt his stomach going out over the edge again, that strange wish coming over his skin, and the train was screaming over and over, trying to warn the boys as best it could. The thunder was too much; Nollie thought he heard someone shouting down below, but he could never tell for sure. Nash and Nollie never looked at one another. The bridge rattled like bones or the earth coming apart stone by stone.

Of course, it didn’t matter who jumped first, who jumped second. It mattered that Nash hit open blue, and Nollie hit a several-ton ancient slab of limestone lurking under the surface and split his femur, thickest bone in the body, clean in half.

And thus Humpy Wortman procured his hobble.

Since that day he kept some sort of the thunder with him. It started in his thigh where he’d been cloven and worked its way outwards in whatever rumble it deemed necessary. It was the same soundwave of precipices that surrounded him, the clutch, the pull downwards, the hole. He had to weigh each one—is this the thunder that cracks him open, finally?

Maybe: the cliff of his mother’s darkened bedroom, his thumb on the doorjamb, searching for the vibrations while the sickened scents of sweat and old sheets filled his nostrils. If he’d step into the bedroom he would fall, for sure, stomach-first, and at the first sight of his

mother shifting on the bed that he refused to name death, he tore himself from the doorway and took the rumbling noises with him to where they ought to be. He hobbled down the steps, out the door, right down the street towards Frank's, always tending to his good leg. But she didn't die, didn't need the shirked name, though the sickness kept Humpy limping forwards.

Or: the quiet thrum under a half-moon standing before a tipsy, reddened Mayhew in the middle of July as Nollie slid a hand over her ankle smooth and white, so slow you could hear the skin whisper. She smirked with a busted tooth, but the knees came unlocked just like that, wrapped around Nollie and dragged him down, down—truly the earth shook asunder, the same open roar of the ground falling away. This, of course, should have been some warning.

Or: the tremble of a slowly rotting porch and the half-open screen door of his house. Inside was Nollie's raging, stumbling unshaven father slamming kitchen chairs down on the floor with harsh claps. Somehow the things held up, somehow the father stayed upright. Nollie stood out front with the porchlight off, letting the tumult grow up his groin and towards his throat—well, Pap, well what do you expect, bits of him roared, who puts roots down in Hobart, Oklahoma? Nollie'd learned to heed that call of a sliding downward stomach and stepped off the porch. Glass broke while he walked away, but the rumble subsided.

Or: the door of the storefront hanging open like a broken jaw—Nollie had come to mistrust open portals—but he stepped in anyways, raising his .38 at the knobby man behind the counter. Nash crowded in behind him, breathing heavy like an asthmatic. Okay, pal, no trouble here if you don't want it, or something like that, waving the gun around. Nollie went back round the corner, being the bigger of the two then by at least a head, slapped a briefcase down on the counter, and told the man to get to it. Snot was coming out the man's mouth, and his eyes had gone sort of like a hare's when it's seen a truck, unsure what its body was doing, but the man's

hands seemed to work fine and started stuffing cash into the case like it was on fire. Good, good, or something like that. More gun waving, each pass of the metal over the store-owner's body rumbling like a clap of thunder coming in closer. Five hundred, six hundred—maybe a thousand dollars. The storeowner was sweating, but the snot stopped up. He said he knew Nollie. He said he knew Nollie's second cousin Jason, used to run out to OKC together now and then. He said that Nollie was Humpy Wortman, that he could see it now with the sort of limp he had going. He stopped stuffing money into the case, and he said it again: I see it now, Humpy, Humpy Wortman.

Nash cracked the man over the head with the butt of his Colt .45, and the man went stiff, and then down. Course, the thunder didn't stop. Course, they grabbed the rest of the cash.

"I don't know, Nash," Humpy said. He was slumped far down into the passenger seat with his knees knocking against the dash. His arms were loosely folded over a suitcase full of money. He looked over the bottom lip of the window, and his eyes flickered back and forth over the passing fenceposts, tracking their motion alongside Highway Nine, a thing of two equal massive colors running side by side along like light—yellow below and blue above. If only it were darker.

"Humpy, Humpy, Humpy," Nash said, leaning over to slap Nollie's knee while he drove with his other forearm tightly pressed against the wheel. His teeth were glowing, nose sharper than ever. Nash had learned to scintillate. "The hardest part is over. You let me do the worrying now, all right?" He gave Nollie's knee a little squeeze and resumed driving.

"Just didn't seem that clean, is all."

“Did we fire any shots?” Nash fired a finger gun up at the ceiling. “Was anyone harmed?” Nollie started to shift upwards and drew in a breath, but Nash cut him off:

“Egregiously. Jesus. You’ve got to take your victories where you can.”

“Well something doesn’t sit right,” Nollie said and slid back downwards. “In my bones, it isn’t sitting right.”

“Well, you’d better set your bones straight because hear this: this last bit we’ve got to run on sheer strength of character here.” Nash ran a hand through his hair, chewing on something in his mouth that wasn’t there. Nollie could see him working himself up to something. “You got to exude it, Humpy.”

“Actualize,” Humpy said. The word was chunky in his mouth, borrowed from Nash, well-worn.

“Damn right: actualize. Manufacture your own facts.” Nash put his hand on Nollie’s thigh again, light like he was a child. “Do you not need that money? Does it not feel good upon your lap? Did we not determine that man was a known gambler, panderer, and philanderer? Is your mother, your dear ma, not in need of fiscal assistance which you aren’t fit to provide her on a regular basis?”

“Still don’t see how my mother, my dear ma, won’t put two and two together and send me to the devil for pinching funds.”

“Incrementally, Humpy. Bit by bit as necessary—spend it like white lies.” He removed his hand and cracked the window; an earthy, whipping air came rushing through the car.

“Cultivate by your own scythe, Humpy. Hell, invent your own scythe. Scythe your own scythe. Ain’t no end to the sickle.”

Scythe was the word on the wind, and it made Nollie turn. “That man’s going to come round. Law has been broken. Laws.”

“Now look, look,” Nash said, wriggling around and huffing, “what we’ll do is get us a bottle a gin, find us a nice field to camp in. We’ll drink that bottle of gin and we shall rejoice knowing that we have done good work here today, for a good cause. We chose this path, and it is a good path. And if anyone chooses to give us trouble, we’ll tell them the truth—we’ve done no wrong and are enjoying a nice panorama, with a nice bottle, in good company after a good day’s work.”

“With a thousand in stolen cash.”

“Oh hell, no, Jesus.” Nash put a hand through his hair again. Young as he was the widow’s peak already tugged at his hairline. “We’re going to bury that case for sure. Willpower is nice, but cops is cops and evidence is evidence.”

“How long we got to wait it out?”

“Oh a week. A week or two. OKC don’t pay attention to much for too long.”

“I don’t know, Nash,” Nollie said slinking further so he couldn’t see out the window any longer. “That man knew me. Knew my cousin. Knew my face.”

The two heard a motor coming on and peered out the windshield to watch the car putter past on the highway—a young couple, headed to the city no doubt, or a nice quiet spot to neck, glowing in some pappy’s car they got to borrow for the evening.

Nash sighed. “Yeah,” he said. “That’s true.”

They were quiet for a long time after that.

The sun was coming even further down when Nash felt inspired enough to pull off the highway on one of its infinite, grassy-fenced stretches to ditch the cash. Nollie was deemed the

muscle and better off digging the hole, able to get his back into it better and quicker, while Nash took a lookout on the hood, smoking a cigarette and fingering the Colt in his jacket pocket. The briefcase had transcended dirty cash—a holy relic, something sacrosanct in Nollie’s hand that needed communion with the earth. He dug and dug, close to the fencepost like he might be swapping posts out mending fence but far enough forward he could mark it with a scratched-up boulder or some such tombstone. If anyone asked—well surely no one would ask. When Nollie figured he had a briefcase-sized hole rounded out, he sighed, speared the shovel into the earth and leaned on it while he let the burn of labor leak out down his shoulders like the dripping sun. His stomach started to go. The case-sized hole was, it seemed, a man-sized hole, a dark thing pulling him with the same clutch, the same vibrating thunder that lined the edge of the pits that had followed him his whole life—it was all dragging here. Of course it was. He gripped the handle of the shovel with a dirt-rivered hand and thought: *See? The sick, lovely slipping forward.*

And Nash knew. Maybe a thunder took them both—maybe the same thunder. Maybe they both knew, and that’s why he fired.

Of course: this hole was *the* hole. And Humpy was on the edge, on the sunset roadside, gutshot and falling in. The impulse was to somehow blame a freak stray bullet. Couldn’t have been, no way no how—thunder means lightning, an act of god. Humpy’s exit wound wasn’t so much a wound but an accident, a blameless hole ripped through reality, just, you know, one of those things. But of course: the actuality was Frank Nash. Bang I’m Frank Nash.

Still standing behind, gun raised, Frank Nash saw a multitude of holes, and he heard a slew of thunders. Humpy clutched his guts, said “Ow,” and sat down.

Course it was real quiet after that. The quietest Nollie had ever felt things. Nollie took his time sitting next to the hole, close enough he could paw the money or grab the shovel if need be. That thunderstorm tickled the horizon.

“I really didn’t want to have to do that, Humpy,” Nash said, walking over. He crouched down beside Nollie in the gravel and the dirt and licked salt off his upper lip. “I want you to know that.”

“For that,” crumpled Humpy said, “you have my undying gratitude.” He clutched at his stomach in a way he assumed was medically sound. “Would’ve made the hole bigger if you had let me know.”

“Now see here,” Nash said, licking and hissing and reaching up to his greasy hair now and then, “now just listen, and it won’t seem so grim. First off, you’re shot in the gut, the kind of wound that lasts hours. Awful hours, but hours, and still pretty mendable provided I didn’t hit any of your vitals, a caveat which I pursued to the best of my ability.”

“You shot a man before?” Nollie spit in the dirt. It was mucus still, something he had to assume was good. It gathered thick in the dust and jiggled around in the wind.

“Can’t say that I have,” Nash said. He too spat: this, a Midwest contagion, all kinds of spit following other men’s spit. “I think I was waiting for that special someone to come along.” Nollie didn’t chuckle; it probably would send daggers up and down his back. “Second, you’re off the hook now, you play your cards right. I—” He waved the Colt around and sniffed at it. “I have painted myself the villain. I committed the violence, smacked old cousin Jim on the noggin, made off with the dough, and did my partner in somewhere along the highway, as such. You’re a victim, see? Provided you hold all your inside bits where they belong, all you got to do is wait for the police to show up and ship you off to get mended. Hell, tell them I’m probably halfway to

Missouri by now, and off they go. Wait a week or so, and we'll be sitting pretty just as we was before, give or take a few stitches. And what's the worst sentence they could give you for stealing money you ain't even have?"

"And how in the fuck you figure I'm going to pay for this?" Nollie pulled a hand away, and it came up red and slick.

"And how in the fuck, Humpy Wortman, do you figure that you're going to make out with any money when you're sitting in prison?" Nash's voice tugged on something while he stared down the highway at the coming storm. Something in his speech was unhooking. Mistrust in the master plan. "Humpy, have some faith in the present moment. Secure yourself in this, our current infinite predicament, and we'll come out the other side. Trust me," spat the guy who blasted him in the back.

And, of course, Humpy did. He readjusted himself so his weight sat at the bottom of his spine like a big sack resting on his shoulders and shifted a bit to the left so he could see the infant, pink flashes of lightning come in closer. Hopefully he'd get picked up before the rain came. Somehow there wasn't much pain yet, like years of time-splintered thunder and worry rushed in to fill the holes present in his slowly leaking, swelling body. For Nollie there was a peace in it, as everything coming to a point. "You win, Nash," he said, which required some grunts and winces. There he was—Humpy the wincy wingman, in his greatest slumped-over form.

"So here's how this runs down," Nash said, lowering himself to the same gritty earth. "Your pain should surmount from here, and I imagine sometime in the near future you will go into shock, Lord willing, and lose consciousness, upon which I split." He sat far enough away that Nollie couldn't touch him, the gun pressed on the outside of his left thigh and out of

Humpy's sight. "Until that time, I'm going to stay right here with you, Humpy, and I'm going to tell you a story, to pass the time. That all right?"

"Don't have much else going for me," Nollie said. Nollie withdrew into himself, part out of his grievous wounds and part out of the nature of, it seemed, every conversation he'd ever had with Frank Nash—maybe he'd always just been some sort of audience. There was an initial moment, that first bit where Nash grabbed you by the elbow and the instinct was to flinch and whip away. Since the train and the leg-break it had gone like this—Frank would speak and Nollie would draw something around himself, pulling up every reasonable defense he could muster like a coat, only to find he didn't need one in the first place. That's to say, Nash would talk Nollie into his natural state, which more often than not was someplace he never wanted to be but was glad once he got there, somehow or other. Maybe just one slug too far of gin, maybe a pass Nollie ought not have passed at Susan Sellers the famously frigid freckled queen, maybe a snuck glance in room 217 by the adjacent cleaning closet at the weekly mumbly rendezvous of Mr. Kristoff's spindly, hairy-knuckled fingers and his choice of lady companion, maybe a weekend in the hills without a word to Nollie's pap just to see how much the stars move, if at all. Now hear me out, it would start, and then there they were.

"You know John Brown?"

Nollie nodded. It was impossible not to know John Brown.

"This is a legend of John Brown, or something like it," Nash said and pressed the soles of his feet together, planted his elbows inside of crooks of his knees. The wind turned cooler, the air before the storm dropping right down on their heads. In the quiet before torrent, his oratory was the only thing heard for miles, throaty and straight, maybe like this:

“See now after he died he came back to the plains where he started, where he first let blood run into the earth. But he was a ghost so he couldn’t drag folks out their houses anymore. So he collected buffalo bones and built a ship out of them and sailed the prairie grasses—some say that’s where the winds come from, those knock-your-house-down types. And he’s got his trusty axe and Sharps carbine, and the bones of the ship whistle in the wind.”

The whip of whistling bones and Sharps carbines hit Humpy: he was still armed. He was an armed robber. The .38 was still in his jacket pocket. “Wasn’t aware of this particular folklore,” he said and tried to shift and get an arm free.

“Anywhere you put blood down, legends come up. That’s common enough. Now hush up and go into shock,” Nash said and rubbed under his nose. “Anyway, one day two folks show up and challenge him to a race—one’s Andrew Jackson on his ghost-white horse and the other is Crazy Horse with his famous lightning bolt facepaint all did up. They want to race him to the pearly gates, they say, and when the sun hits its noon high they’re all off—Brown rushing his ghost ship, Jackson thrusting a saber, and Crazy Horse shouting on top his red-tailed hawk. And maybe Jackson’s horse can’t get traction in the sky and he keeps falling behind, but the more Brown tries, the further the bright feathers of Crazy Horse’s bird pulls out in front. He tries to shout the Indian down with his thunder voice, but nothing shakes those razor feathers. But that’s why God invented the Sharps carbine.

“Assured of his victory, Brown rockets to the pearly gates through a golden haze, and once he comes up over a crest of clouds he sees, in front the gates, a whole brigade of blue-suited soldiers, bayonets fixed, just waiting for him. Brown hops out with his axe and asks what the hell is going on, and all anyone says is that Jackson sent them ahead. Then they gun him down before he can say nothing, and his blood runs right up against the gates.”

Nash leaned back and sucked in air like it was liquid, some sort of ether. He grinned to himself, and some wind took up the wispy strands of thinning hair on his head.

“That’s it?” Humpy grumbled.

“That’s the legend,” Nash said, “or one of the legends of John Brown at least.”

Nollie, bloody Nollie, found himself speechless—intense abdominal pain, lightheadedness, a general drop in body temperature, a sense the wind was growing vicious. He sat in a special light between sun and storm, a leviathan on the horizon capable of smiting down houses and plains, the light of day the only barrier keeping it at bay; the world was made unreal, the space between sleep and dream. And there, across from him, unscathed and toothy was Frank Nash and his floppy story.

Nollie spat and went for the .38. He steadied the shot on the ground, and he could feel parts of himself moving around inside, shifting, leaking.

“Nope,” Nash said, leapt up and jumped, both feet high like a child, then stomped down on Nollie’s wrist. The gun went off, and the bullet smacked into the bumper of the car. Nash kicked the gun, and it skittered out onto the highway. Nollie’s wrist was probably broken, which didn’t seem to matter much. He lay there and gurgled a bit. “Can’t have that,” Nash said. “Bad for your alibi, your testimony. Might be tempted to shoot at cops, maim your partner. Not in the plan.”

Spit leaked out the side of Humpy’s mouth and down into the dirt. “Nash, what’d you have me out here for?” he said. His voice was tinny, like it was coming out of a rock or vibrating from the car door. He ground dirt in his teeth and chewed on his tongue, his cheek. In his helplessness and wriggling, a hatred gestated, sick and hot like the slick running out his wounds. He looked up at the cavernous nostrils of Frank Nash’s nose. A fire was on Nash’s head, a

violent whipping of hair like the flames pouring out John Brown's mouth—Humpy couldn't hate Nash even gutshot and worthless, while looking up at him like that, so he hated his own ineptitude, his lack of movement, he hated the life force pouring out of him. He gnashed his inability, and Frank smiled.

"Guy needs a partner," he said. "Couldn't have achieved this by myself, all alone, my first ever job, now could I?" Nash leaned down again so his shadow eclipsed Humpy's quickening corpse. "And here we are again—this attitude, your will applied to the present is reckless, crippling. You won't die here, Humpy, and you'll be five hundred the better for it. This pain is a momentary sacrifice and a ticket out from under any cop's nose; if anything, I've got the hard road ahead, of lies, of laying low, of perfecting our story while you sit in a nice old hospital bed napping. If it feels like death now," Nash said, placing a hand on Humpy's shoulder, "that's only because you can't see past all *this*—" He flapped around like that, like all *this*: "You can't see any future. That's death right there, not some minor gunshot wound, sure?"

Nash heard it first and perked up like an alert deer, all spine and ears, but after a time Nollie could hear it too: the soft humming and bumbling of a regularly approaching vehicle. The car was coming along in the sunshine, headed direct for the approaching blackness of a wall of rain and wind out to the west. Hobart must have been drowning already. "Now see here, I'm just going to go stand over by the car. You sit there and you shut the fuck up. So much as a gurgle and I jam my fist right up in your guts, Humpy Wortman, so help me God. And button up your coat—you look a goddamn mess." Nash's mouth, too, it seemed, was lit aflame like Brown's thunder-mouth. Humpy wondered what shock was like, if maybe his consciousness had already slipped. He wiped the spit from his chin and fastened a few buttons over his wound.

Nash fished up Humpy's pistol and stuffed a gun in each of his pockets. He made his way over to the car, pulled out a cigarette and leaned against the trunk. The Model-T came putting closer and slowed like a cautious animal, padding along once the driver caught sight of Nash and Nollie. A crack of thunder split open the sky, and the car took this vacuous time to pull off alongside the highway a ways down. Two men clambered out in blues, mustachioed, unkempt, unshowered, one already with a gun in hand. The other took off his hat and rubbed at the balding spot in the middle of his skull. They were thin men, young men covered in scraggly goatees touched with the dust of roads, tired and swaggering beneath their heavy, professional clothes. Cops, cops, cops.

Nash eyed them both and shoved a hand deep in his trousers where the Colt slept and breathed in stunted huffs. "Not one fucking sneeze," he said out the corner of his mouth.

Nollie was already half drug up by the shaft of the shovel, leaning on it like a stand-in spine. Mess as he was, it wouldn't take long to put the pieces together. Nollie would have his hospital, and Nash would have his cell—but Humpy had been identified. Humpy was a known armed suspect. Humpy was half-dead, and did cops take robbers to the hospital? Was it easier to let them die roadside? He watched Nash straighten and smooth his trousers. A flash of the shaky master plan took him again, and Humpy resolved that he either left with Nash, or not at all. He hid his grimace and put his slowing heart into the song of Frank Nash. Five hundred bucks never seemed like so little.

"Boys," the balding copper said soft and low. He replaced his cap, and they walked up and stood a little ways off looking dirty, with folded arms and scowls. The other's gun hung unwavering.

“Gentlemen,” Nash said. Both the cops’ eyes flicked down to Humpy who now sat next to the shovel, the briefcase hidden behind his ass. For now, Humpy’s faith was in the song of Frank Nash, in whatever spin he managed to spun.

“Everything all right here?” the older cop asked. His hands moved down to hips, closer to weaponry, tighter grip on power. “Storm coming in quick, looks like.”

The younger leaned in closer to get a look at Humpy. “That you, Hump?” he said and half-grinned under the squirrely hairs of his moustache. “Humpy Wortman? You ain’t looking too good there.”

“Hey there, Darrell,” Humpy gasped.

Nash looked at the cops, both bent and glistening, and he looked at Humpy, with a dab of blood cresting his jacket and seeping through his shirt. “Well, fuck it,” he said. Nash pulled the Colt from his pocket and put two bullets in Nollie Wortman, one in his chest and another through his right nostril. Nollie’s shovel grip slipped, and he spilled out onto the earth.

The cops were shouting, waving guns, bloody hell about to shoot when Nash tossed the gun on the ground and put his hands up in the air and sneezed like a stick of dynamite. His hands shook in the wind at the wrists. “There’s the murder weapon, there’s your body, here’s your confession,” he said. He nodded over behind the body at the now-crimson-christened briefcase. “Under a thousand in cash.”

“I don’t understand,” the older cop said. His cap was off again, and his gun hung limply from finger bones. He was all sinews and a thin scalp.

Nash put his hands, one over the other, on the base of his skull, feeling the groove where the spine starts. “What is there to not understand?” he said. The first errant drops, coming down

ragged and wild at improbable angles, spiraled to pavement splats. One caught the younger cop, slapped him in the cheek. “Am I not under arrest?”

“Oh you’re under arrest,” the younger muttered, wiping salty wet from his skin. He skittered out towards the gun before him, crouched and hobbling sideways, crab-like. He fished up the gun like it was a thousand degrees.

“Where you from?” the elder asked. He holstered his gun. His age came upon him, descending from the tip of his skull and working its way through each muscle, loosening and shifting till it came down to his feet. He teetered uneasily. “You from OKC?”

“Does it matter?” Nash shrugged and sniffed. “From Little Rock,” he said, and spat in the dirt. It mixed with collecting pats of soaked-up rain drift. “From Kansas City. From Clinton. From Chicago. Nicaragua. I dropped right down out the sky, smashed into the grass right over yonder,” he said, nodding to fields that rolled into fields that rolled into amassing gray and wind. “Born in a fiery hole in the ground, climbed out smudgy, hot and pink. Look, can we get out of here, boys, before I get soaked?” The rain was becoming audible, like the padding of a thirsty, wayward dog.

“Whose money’s in that briefcase over there?”

“What’s so difficult about this?” Nash said. His voice cranked up a pitch, rising like it was hoisted by chain. “Robbed a place, shot a man, and, as you witnessed, shot him twice more in the presence of the law, until he was pronounced dead at the scene. Far as I can tell, you got me on murder charges. That’s it. No questions.” His hands fell down to his sides, swept at his pants and danced near his pockets. “Do your fucking job. Goddamnit if it isn’t all hell to get your career off the ground around here,” he said, waving limply at the corpse of Humpy Wortman growing damp next to his fortune. “Now get me the fuck out of here before I drown.”

The older cop's hand had slid back to his gun, though he didn't know it. Lightning came across, closer than it ought to be, and brought out the sharp circles under Frank Nash's eyes, the limits of a skull wrapped in just enough skin. A sigh came out of Nash, and his shoulders leaked downwards. He collapsed, sort of, into a crouched pile in the dirt.

"Was it something I did?" he asked. The cops inched closer, less and less aware of being there, next to this crumpled man and a corpse. Could have been the storm, or the thickened wind, but they felt observant to something irregular, private, rooted in the dark corners of rooms. Akin to wind, maybe. They felt, at least a little bit, angelic in this respect. "I must have been too forward," he said and then spat again. The earth was turning dark. "Jesus."

"Come on, pal," the younger said and dragged Nash up. The two blues took him to their car slow and deliberate. Nash's bones seemed slim in their grips, and he had the feel of a child in hand-me-down clothes he won't grow into for years. Nash looked at the car like he'd never seen one before. "Somebody'll be out for your friend," the older cop said. It needed to be said, though it likely wasn't heard.

Nash took one look back, from the shovel, to the blood becoming mixed with rivulets of running mud and silt, to the folded-up body of Humpy Wortman. Nash touched his chest like Humpy always had and picked at the skin of his chest a little before the younger cop slapped it away. A tear of thunder opened up the air and sucked all the sound out for miles. In that space, Nash swore he saw his own body curled around the shovel, shot full of holes, leaking and cooling and shifting in the breeze. His mouth hung open a little in death, the red inside still fresh from a slightly protracted tongue. He wanted to run, to go out and grope at his own corpse. To know the weight of himself. To feel the lift of something left behind. To reckon his own earthly burden.

A shotgun-spray mind's eye gripped him, the remembering—he was shooting Humpy over and over, a thousand fractured bodies falling into pre-dug ditches, all for under a thousand bucks, and at the end of Nash's slender hand, a leaky gun. The smell of impending rain and gunfire. And yeah, he was there too, on the bridge where the train bell shrieked and feet were electric with the humming railroad ties and he was carving the word chicken onto Humpy's spirit. He was ready to jump. But he was also in a street, in a thick city, sun flashing off a marble building. He was the street, all of it, the cars, the warmth, the summer, the smothered heads tucked into hats hurrying for their homes, chewing on newspapers. He was the trains squealing into the station, cars plugged with bodies waiting to feel free. He was the future. He was the guns firing, the bullets tearing into the building, the screams, the fingers clawing at blood leaked through throats. Something powerful, something important. He was the death of himself.

Frank Nash realized he was on to something. He sighed. An itch crawled up his lower back, but before Nash could break away, the two men placed hands on his head and shoved him in the back of the car. He smashed a knee on the doorframe and hissed.

When he looked back out the rear window, Humpy Wortman's corpse was next to the shovel yet again, bedraggled and sodden, maintaining his roadside station. The car started to pull away, and as they left the slowly degrading hole in the ground, rain came down in sheets and hammered at the top of the car. The two men in front couldn't even speak. In front of the car was a blurred wall of wet and gray—they might as well have been thrown in a cloud, tossed underwater, smeared across the road like a thumb over spilled ink.

As the car inched along, Nash folded his hands in his lap and smiled. The air in the vacuum left behind by cracked lightning smelled like the sweet, metallic scent of ozone, a pale

and bitter smell that reminded the men of death. As they drove, audible even over the torrent battering the planet, was Jellybean Nash, sniffing and sniffing and sniffing.

Chapter 2 - The Washer at the Ford

“Jellybean Goes to War”

Two satellite towns had sprung up around the railroad on account of the mines, neither of them much more than a smattering of shacks stuffed with families and new chances at life, but when the state of Oklahoma was born, the solemn sanctity of the United States Congress united these two fledgling, wispy-haired towns in holy matrimony, and the city of McAlester was born proper, fingers clasped, united to never look back.

McAlester was a smear of a town rubbed across coal deposits in the middle of Indian territory, sliced down the center by Union Pacific stretching from Kansas down to Texas. With the coal mines, in came the Pennsylvanians, the Italians, the bony brave, and out gone the Choctaw. No matter, no matter. Come to the land of blackened faces and trim fingernails, children. Welcome to the church of wage. McAlester: a place for you to die but not today.

And it was good.

Of course, the trains were full of coal, not people; there was only one reason to stop in McAlester, and that was if you planned on cobbling shoes. And no one planned on cobbling shoes, because cobbling shoes was the chief concern of offenders holed up in the Big Mac, the Oklahoma State Penitentiary.

Nobody left McAlester. A few tried once at the Bic Mac: beat a guard down, took his gun, wrassled their way out the prison, and within hours were rounded up, pinned against a cliff like coyotes and shot one by one in the dust.

Of course, the Big Mac was also where they killed men. McAlester not only dealt in coal but executions, so one way or another the gentlemen would've got their state-sponsored firing squad. The fresh air might have been nice, though; a guy's got to try, after all.

But at the end of the day it wasn't Leavenworth, and it wasn't the mines, so that, too, was good.

Of course, it was also where Lucas Mooney sat against the wall with a pad of paper tucked in the crook of his hips, fetal. A pen in his teeth clicked back and forth across incisors. Mooney had a window that looked out on the fields—it wasn't anything but fields, more often yellow than green, splaying out from the town in every direction. The area used to participate in a great sea, eons back, but now it patiently desiccated. Bodies of water those days were accidents, lapped up. Lucas Mooney chewed. It was how he worked back and forth across a page, by the patient indentation of teeth into rubber. Sometimes he wrote a word, sometimes he crossed one black. Didn't matter much. Not the point, really.

The music leaking out his gramophone stopped at the end of "Song to the Moon" from Dvorak's *Rusalka*, and as always, he slithered over, lifted the needle and restarted the track. Dvorak was just about the only opera the prison had in its entirety, one that hadn't been battered down to a few records or bought cheap in a pile, fragmented and slapped together haphazardly. "Song of the Moon" always had to be played twice, just fine—Mooney's necessary hiccup. With a shuffle and a flip, the initial sprinkling of silver harp-light rained down, as before, unbowed. Lucas Mooney had that power—he allowed himself that relapse into time. The collection was all twelve-inch records, most split up illogically from movement to movement in increments of shattered music, but the moon got its own perfect, self-contained six minutes of bliss. Seemed a shame to deny its light.

The piece was about a water sprite, the moon, some failure of communication, a descent, perhaps. Something like that—to Lucas Mooney, it seemed important, but as of yet no Czechs had landed at the Big Mac to set him straight. So be it—pretty ladies and moonlight.

With the sprinkle coming back down, Lucas hobbled back to his nook below the window and drew the notepad up atop his breastbone. A wind took the trees outside, ashes maybe, and shook them like kids on a porch in a storm.

He ran his thumb across the paper with a little hiss. Mooney's vibrato waned more towards earthy gurgle, but his composition dragged itself along note by note. Each side of the record tracked in at about five minutes—he could get a line down, breathe in its ink, shift the record to the next trip into Dvorak's watery world, sit down again, and move to the next line. *Rusalka* was two and a half hours, give or take. There was time. It could work, piece by piece.

Lucas Mooney tapped his temple with a wet pen and read back his letter hitherto:

“Sarah. I know it's been a spell since my last letter. Things have picked up what with the shoe factory up and going, and soon here a tailor shop too once they get it built in. I got out of shoe work, thankfully, by way of a job as warden's chef which I suppose I can thank a long line of temporary and voluntary mothers for. Anyway, it beats working in the shop. And I sneak food here and there, sometimes a fruit, a apple now and then, and it's nice to chew on the cooked fat of whatever Warden Dick's pick of the week winds up being.

“So that's new as new can be in my life, anyhow. I talk less and less here, save with the warden. He slips me books now and again. He got me this record collection here I've got spinning. It's Dvorak. You'd like it—it's mostly lady parts on account of it being about a fairy or some such thing. Sometimes my voice comes out tinny and I wonder, truly, if people can forget to speak. I think about you a lot these days, especially when I wake up. Mornings are hard. This time of month the moon lines up perfect with my window in a split quarter moon, just

pinned up there. For some reason, that's hard. I guess I learned to find you in things.

"I dreamt again the other night. This rooster was climbing up a hill. It looked crazy, but I swear I can remember the color of each feather on that bird. It kept going up the hill, and a wind would knock it back down. A flutter of colors. It'd try again and then get blasted down. So I started up the hill and grabbed the rooster and it lost its damn mind. I wrung its neck, and I made it up to the top of the hill against the wind. So I guess the rooster made it up the hill too.

"I love you Sarah."

"Song of the Moon" tumbled upwards into the dark again. That was a mistake—*I love you*. Can't cross that shit out, no amount of ink to blot it. The best-case scenario would be a grainy stain. Well, well. Mooney lifted himself up and walked to the gramophone. He sucked his pen, drained the last of the track out, and the final chord fluttered downwards, flapping.

The only thing Mooney couldn't do was start again—he gripped the record, slid out the next shining disk and let it spin. The next bit—the song after the adored one, that slipshod, forward kind of remembering—was split up down the middle, one half the track per side. It was some altercation, seemed like. Descent into a valley full of pines, something wet and scented. Lucas could think for one half the track, scribble the other. To the window, to the window: Rusalka had arrived, riding down on trickled flutes. Fie, fie, and so on.

How to salvage—Lucas wiped his thin thumb up and down the page. Focus on her. Bury the shit chicken story and let her fill the page. He could pretty well figure each answer she'd etch out, more or less. Life out there, how's things, is the uncle's leg set straight and moving right, the

tutored kids, all that expectant nonsense. Just drop the answers in, or skip asking the questions in the first place.

Maybe nothing about the kids she was teaching. Maybe nothing about kids at all. A question that deserved to be sketched: *you coming along healthy—ought to be due sometime soon, yeah?* But that was the one question, burning Lucas Mooney, that couldn't be slid into that letter, much as he wanted. Talk about slick. Bloody.

Percussive hits, some timpani, rise into magnificence—some kind of deal had been struck. The track clipped off, and Mooney switched it to the other side, the instrumental bits. That activity too was participatory—Lucas made the magic keep running. Pretty fairies and moonlight moving in concentric circles, at his hand.

He ran back, grabbed his pen and hammered it out: *How you getting on?*

Unanswerable, concerned, inspired. Lucas Mooney was growing tired though the sun still came down in its perfect line across his windowpane.

I love you Sarah. How you getting on?

Hunting horns called, then a sort of musical dalliance, then another hunting call. The Prince had arrived.

A murmur went through the cells, guttural and hushed. It was a wave Lucas Mooney knew pretty well after a near year of curling up in that room. Wasn't more than sixty, maybe seventy inmates those days and the arrival of a new one was enough to get folks talking. He slid the notepad under his mattress and went over to his open door, where he leaned and tried to look unconcerned.

But some part of him wanted it to mean something. For it to be somebody. It wasn't always this way.

Across the block, approaching down the hall into the half circle C that Mooney called home was a thin, crumpled man guarded on each side by silent hulks, too big for the mines and too dumb to leave McAlester. The man looked little, angular, like a bird. His head was too far forward on account of the cuffed hands behind his back, so in that way he leaned like a kid late for dinner. He'd been struck bald, early onset. A couple men yelled but most just watched silently. Humbling as it was to gain a fellow sufferer, no one in the Big Mac was thrilled to see another man get committed; they all knew there was one way to leave, and it consisted of bang bang in a ditch, have a toast and leave the body to the birds, the criminals for the critters.

The man came closer and shuffled side to side, a little unsure of his steps. Mooney had weaseled his way into an isolated corner where no one could whisper, where he could evade the sixth senses and eavesdropping and community spirit that bled the whole prison dry, where he could listen to his records in peace.

Well shitfire, he had a new neighbor.

The Prince's speech ended, and Mooney let the record run quiet. The captured man grinned lop-sided as he stumbled along. The guards uncuffed him, shoved him gently into his cell and locked him in. "I ain't ate dinner," the man said. A guard shrugged.

The man in the next cell over was moving around. There were sounds of skin on cloth, something like palms wiping across the walls, and a constant breathing. Mooney thought of continuing his letter, of flipping the record and letting the music carry out the evening—the moon wouldn't pass through his line of sight till late in the night. He went to lift the needle and stopped with his finger lipped under the arm. The letter could wait. There was time. The records could wait, too, they could wait as long as Mooney liked. Everything, anything could wait. Wasn't going anywhere. The needle got heavy in his hand, and an ache started in the roots of his

spine, that same exhaustion raining down on him. Soon it would be dark, and then quiet, except for little breaths.

There was movement in the front of the new inmate's cell and then a clatter on the bars. Mooney dropped the needle and slid to the front of his own space, making sure his feet hissed audibly on the floor. He leaned his head on the cold metal.

"Well, neighbor," the man said. Quiet, ringing, like a dropped key. "Looks like we got occasion to get acquainted. Not often you make friends under such fortuitous circumstances." The man's beak poked out the bars, and Mooney watched his dark, little eyes. There was a grin to them still.

Lucas nodded, his faculties of speech still all ground up in pen and ink.

"It's a hell of a thing to hear it said," the man said. "Life sentence. Inconceivable. Couldn't never wrap your head around it, even if you wanted." He put a hand through his thin hair. "One little mishap, then: one lifetime, please. All we ask is all your waking days."

"You're the one broke the law," Mooney said.

"So you do speak," the man said. He sniffed real loud, like he might spit up on the floor. "What's your name, chatterbox?"

"Lucas Mooney."

"Well, Mooney, it's a pleasure. I'm Frank Nash," Frank Nash said. "Some call me Jelly, Jellybean."

"Where you from, Frank Nash?"

"Mississippi," he said, a little louder.

"No you ain't." Lucas gripped the bars and twisted his fists back and forth. "Not with that accent, you ain't."

“Fine,” Nash said. “South Dakota.”

“Getting closer, at least.”

The light of the cell was growing yellow. It was a holy time of evening, just a little respite to revere that space between now and the next dead day. The quiet was coming on.

“Can you do me a favor, Mooney?” Nash said. His voice had dropped back down to a faint metallic. Mooney knew the move—the altered thought, the timbre it took to fill a new, forced and permanent space. Nash was feeling out his boundaries, sonically, like a bat. The prisoner’s murmur.

“Being?”

“What’s that music you had on when they drug me in here?”

Lucas looked at the immobile gramophone, the pile of fading record sleeves. “Dvorak,” he said.

“You mind putting that Dvorak back on for me?”

“It’s long,” Mooney said. He watched Nash press his shined forehead against the bars. “Probably a couple hours, at least.”

“I don’t mind,” Frank Nash said, his captive smile leaking out again. “Don’t got anywhere to be.”

Mooney watched his face for a second, the strangely curved lip. There was something sharp behind it, some way that Frank Nash could make a sheepish thing sinister. Mooney sniffed and disappeared into his records and sifted through the paper till he found the first disc. He pulled the track out and, with a sigh, let it spin.

Frank Nash was settling in the cell next door, arranging himself on his cot, most like, but after that it was quiet. Mooney abandoned his letter and sat down on the floor before the

gramophone. He'd straighten his spine and clutch the next track in his bones, anticipating, and when each ended, he'd slip the next segment of music back into the air. Between each track was a vacuum like the inevitable space between breaths, where no thought could come in. Just an empty thing, an act of waiting condensed down into a dark, damp little pocket. But the music came again, and again, and again. Lucas shifted his way through the whole opera. The tracks lay in a neat pile next to his crossed legs.

After the finale, Mooney sat, figuring Frank Nash had fallen asleep. A pale night had slithered down his window, and the next cell was quiet, but after the last chords rang out, there was a rustle, and Frank Nash's voice cutting through air: "She's mute."

Mooney made for the front of his cell. "You speak Czech?"

"Czech?" Nash said. "Hell no. Not even a little."

As Mooney listened, he could picture that little smile slicing the dark. "Then how you figure?"

"Well she always sings by herself," Nash said. "She can't sing with anyone else, when they're there, 'cause they couldn't hear her. That's the trick, isn't it?"

And it was true. Mooney peered at the pack of records—after the opening, apart from choral interludes, Rusalka always sang solo. This was her magic.

"Just like you, Lucas Mooney," Frank Nash said.

Lucas Mooney moved away from the door but stayed standing in the middle of his cell. After a while he could hear Nash clambering back in bed. After that: nothing.

Mooney put the records back in their box, stretched his back, and climbed in bed, waiting for his quarter moon to come hanging down. He couldn't stay awake long enough to see its silver crest.

That night, Lucas Mooney dreamed.

Mooney walks at night, he carries a meager load, his feet chew up the earth lacking the surety of ground, and under a starless night, this landscape takes strange forms in the dark. Some uncanny weight rests between two thin shoulder blades—a forced march. Five miles ought not be so long. Footsteps ought not be so trim. There’s a man on either side of Mooney, silent. There’s a man in front and back of Mooney, and they’re the best thing that keeps his feet moving. No one talks, breathes, sniffs, heaves—it would violate the night. Mooney knows that’s his only job—keep the black intact. Move along.

They move hand over foot, it seems, like climbing up a slope backwards. No normal way to interact with an earth, but that’s the word, the order that keeps them spinning forward. Along and amongst the black are thicker patches of dark, trees or hills maybe, or just denser bits of air, but place them in a shoddy line and they lead to a trickle of distant lights, always moving, pinned on the horizon and twinkling like candles. That’s how space comes undone—every time Mooney looks, his stomach swells and colored dots slip into his vision because the lights are too far, too close, so unoriented in space. He thinks he can hear them. He wants to. His sweat slips into the earth; this is his movement. He knows there’s still a long way to go, dark before, dark behind, and a fickle string of steps connects places coming, places soon dead. His body goes, going. This must be how the world turns.

Some smells didn’t bother Mooney as much as they used to, early on when he started cooking for Warden Dick, when he’d go back to his cell wreathed in grease, garlic, wine, and the stickiness of sage, of rosemary clinging to his fingers. His ribs used to turn inwards, claw at the

organs. Hunger wasn't it so much as the gulf between Dick's fine dining and Mooney's porridge, his bread, his weekly helping of red meat: stringy beef. He nibbled, sipped, picked, and grew used to things clinging to his skin.

That night was easy—Mooney watched the outer lips of diced onions become creamy brown as they sizzled around in bacon fat and garlic. Onion, balsamic, garlic, cheese—these weren't awful temptations, but that's why he fried up the pancetta first. That pancetta wasn't so simple. Meat, fat, things to die for.

"One thing about all these Italians," Warden Dick had said, slapping down a fatty log of rolled, peppered meat on his desk. "I can get this shit whenever I please." He rubbed a finger along the fat of the pancetta, more adipose than meat. Out of a torn paper sack, he yanked a pound of white cheddar and a fresh baguette. "The mine's ain't all shit," he'd said.

Lucas Mooney chewed on a slice of crisped-up fat from a lopsided slab of pancetta. He was making French onion soup, toasting slices of the baguette, shredding cheese, stirring the onions turning browner in the bacon fat, heating metal soup bowls over the stove, full of smells, swimming in smells. He threw the red wine and balsamic into the onions and watched them scream.

That day, again, for the first time since he could remember, he became hungry.

"It's not that old," Nash had said around noon as he hunched over a metal table. He nodded at the surrounding walls, their unblemished paint, and the slightly scuffed floors. "Anybody could tell that coming in. Hell, they're still in construction, adding that wing for the tailoring shop."

Lucas spooned at his porridge. He tore a bit of bread off and slid it into his mouth—it was rubbery, day-old stuff, and if you chewed it right, sopped it with a spoonful of porridge, it wasn't half bad. Was warm, at least.

“What I'm saying here,” Nash said, stirring his bowl, “is that *new* means they ain't quite hammered out the minutiae in their plans. There's holes, somewhere. Something they overlooked. How old's this place, anyhow?”

“Can't be but eight years,” Mooney said.

“And nobody's found anything out so far?”

“Three made it out,” he said, chewing on another piece of bread. The two of them sat alone in the mess, away from the other men, the cobblers, loudmouths, sour miners, the gunmen that got thrown aside. Mooney always sat alone. Now he still sat alone, but Frank Nash was there too.

“Well, how'd they manage?”

“Took a gun from a guard, took him hostage, wound up shooting him.” Mooney swallowed his bread, made waves with his spoon. Suddenly he didn't much like being tethered or knowing things. “Killed a clerk in the store on their way out. A judge, too. Shot them all. Ching Reed, Charlie Koontz and the other one, Tom something. Think they had ties to Chicago.”

“All you got to do is rough up one guard? And nobody else done it?”

“Couldn't get a car. They were at least fifteen miles out from McAlester, and most that live there don't drive nowhere, or even leave town. Best they could do was hide out and catch a freight train by morning. Wound up shot in a ravine by a search party. Nowhere to hide out,” he said and waved around. “You've seen these hills. Even trees don't get along out here.”

Nash leaned back and folded his arms across a bony sternum. He hadn't eaten much the last couple weeks, and when he had, it went right through—Mooney could hear him at night, every liquid in his body running out as fast as it could. It happened more often than not. Every man an accidental waterfall beating against a rock. “And nobody even tried since that?”

“Not since that,” Mooney said, mopping up the rest of his grease with the butt of his bread. “No way out that doesn't end in a permanent fix.” He held a finger gun up, fired it twice, finished his bread.

Nash took a deep breath, his whole body heaving up and down. Mooney found it hard to look at him head-on—that fixed grin, that slightly sideways chin. He liked it when they had their own rooms and existed in angles only. “Well I ain't sticking around,” he said quietly.

“Oh yeah?” A bubble of laughter erupted across the room and sank down along the walls.

“And what the hell are you doing here, Mooney, with all your books, and your operas, and your little notes and shit? You don't belong here more than any other man I've talked to. Got no business at all.” He sniffed and leaned onto the table. “The hell you even get in here for?”

Mooney looked at the floor, scooted his chair out. He thought about leaving but just gripped the sides and sucked at his teeth.

“Fine, fair,” Nash said and reclined again. “Everybody's got a little bit of angel in them. Even if it's only a finger.” He wiggled a pinky.

“Killed a man,” Mooney said.

“I figured,” Nash said.

They were quiet for a bit.

Nash slammed his open palms on the table. “Well, I ain't fucking staying here for long. I know that for a fact.”

“In your bones?” Mooney asked.

“Goddamn right, in my bones.” Nash slapped his thighs, wrung his forearms.

Mooney didn’t have much to say to that, mostly because he believed Frank Nash.

Mess ended, they marched back, and they retired for the afternoon. It went on for a long time like that. The porridge stopped filling Mooney’s gut. He partly chewed the bread and swallowed half-heartedly. His nibbling waxed. Everyday was Nash telling him about leaving. Things was getting bad.

Mooney poured heated beef broth over the onions and brittle pancetta, watching the curls of steam. He gingerly set toasted baguette afloat and garnished with grated cheese. It was more soup than one man needed to eat. He placed the large tin bowl on a tray, set the other two remaining hunks of toast beside it, grabbed a thick soup spoon and the remaining wine. When he reached the door he banged it with his heel and tried not to slosh the broth. He heard keys, and shifting, and the door opened.

The guard leaned over the tray. Mooney could smell the acrid underside of his pits. This was their ritual. “Smells good,” the guard said, and Mooney shrugged. He never said anything, but now he was tempted to hiss: *why you? What do you wait for? There’s no warden future for you. You think I’d slip linguine on the desk scuffed up by your boots?*

Course he would, Mooney thought. He’d chew whatever fat came his way.

Mooney thought of bringing that man’s face down in scalding broth, right in his little eyes. It’d be an easy thing to take a gun then, to shout your way out the joint. Dinner’s served. And then, at some point, Mooney’d be dead in a ditch. It’d be a real easy thing.

The guard led him to Warden dick’s office, slipped his keys in the lock, and let Lucas inside. The door locked behind him.

“Soup,” Warden Dick said, and Mooney nodded. He sidled over and set down the tray, the spoon, the wine. Steam rose under the warden’s chin.

“French onion,” Mooney said, “with the pancetta to give it some flavor. All the onions and garlic soak up that fat.” He rubbed under his nose. “Wouldn’t touch it yet; just took that broth off the stove.”

“Ought to let that cheese melt,” Warden Dick said. He waved to a seat, and Mooney took it. Warden Dick wrapped a veiny hand around the bottle of wine, brought it to his lips and sighed. After a drink he shoved it over to Mooney. “Ain’t got glasses,” he said. “Better to drink it all anyhow.” Warden Dick nodded, nodded.

Mooney had a swig. The warden’s office was warm, framed in wood and lined with two big old oak bookshelves crammed with tattered volumes. The warden had drug in some kind of throw rug unbeaten for years, a red and dusty thing. His desk was clean. His armchair was supple. Warden Dick built that prison, and he tended to nest in it. The window was cracked, and a soft breeze came in, an early March, late evening lapse back into winter. Mooney could taste it.

“You read that book I give you?” the warden said. Warden Dick’s office was bigger than the prison library, which was only a year old and filled with whatever McAlester families could scrimp up and toss in boxes, which in an Indian-coalminer town wasn’t a hell of a lot.

It was Robert Frost’s *North of Boston*. Most of the time it sat half-open under the windowsill paling in the sun. “Awful logical,” Mooney said.

“But not bad,” Dick said.

“No, not bad,” Mooney agreed. He’d only read about a third of it; had it for a week or so. “Might as well be from China, though. All that New England. All that snow.”

Warden Dick grinned and leaned back in his seat. He took a ginger sip on the wine, like drinking from cupped hands of melted snow. Mooney could see him in New England. China even. So long as that office followed him. “We got ice, though,” Warden Dick said.

“Ice and coyotes,” Mooney said and took the bottle from the warden. No way to be drinking wine. No way to be passing time.

Warden Dick took up his spoon, blew on the broth, thought better of it and ripped off a hunk of baguette and began sopping. “Lucas Mooney, you got a cloud over you today,” he said.

“That so?”

“It is.” Warden Dick took a bite. He talked through half-grit teeth.

Lucas Mooney could kill the warden right there on top his unwashed rug. It’d be an easy, easy thing.

But Warden Dick was a good man. Mooney knew it. “Reality of my situation sets in sometimes,” Mooney said and drank a little too long. “When I’m being awful logical.”

They didn’t talk much about their strange relationship. Lucas Mooney and Warden Dick melted a little in that office; occupationally, it was an empty sort of space. “I had another dream,” the warden said. He leaned on elbows. “There was a tornado, but instead of my house being torn away, it was the only thing that stayed still. The whole rest of the world ripped itself to pieces.” He picked up another hunk. “What you think of that one?”

You’re going to die soon, simple enough, Mooney thought, that’s what. “Maybe that’s what’s most important to you.” It wasn’t—Warden Dick spent more time at the prison than his own home, and that was with all hours of sleeping. “Maybe it’s your most tethered-down thing.”

“That makes some kind of sense.” He had a sip of his soup and smiled. “Can’t say I actually had any French onion soup before, but I’m sure this one’s the best.” Warden Dick

leaned back and sighed again. “Ten years gone, new prisoners every other week, all this construction and shit—this place is getting too big for me, Mooney.”

“Maybe we’re all getting smaller.”

“Not you,” Dick said. “Not you—you’re the only one growing in these walls. We ought to get you out of here.” Warden Dick rubbed his thick chin. “Yeah, we ought to. Maybe come summertime you can run your own damn errands. You’re better off shopping anyhow, be able to cook whatever meals you please. Get you some more books. Some more herbs, maybe a little garden going in here. Get you some air.”

Mooney ran his thumb along the wine label and felt his skin sticking, just a little bit. The warden looked serious. He looked shrunken. Mooney shrugged. “Well I ain’t about to disagree,” he said, slowly, making sure the words formed right.

“Yeah, we really ought to,” Warden Dick kept saying. He sloshed more of his soup. “We’ll see what I can do.”

“Mr. Dick, this the wine talking?”

“Honest,” Warden Dick said, “it’s my goddamn stomach, and this soup, and anything else you ever cooked.” They sipped, they grinned. “I may be shrinking, but we got to make you fit somehow.” He frowned, pressed his bread into his broth like what he’d said wasn’t quite right. “We’ve got to make all this fit.”

They finished the wine. Mooney’s cloud grew a little lighter, and they played *Rusalka* on Warden Dick’s gramophone—the warden’d ordered his own copy on Lucas Mooney’s suggestion. When “Song to the Moon” finished, the warden played it back again. They listened to the pretty, mute thing singing.

In the darkness Mooney could hear a river running. Since that was the only thing available to him—some made-up audible outline, a barrier of a sludgy mind—he made for it. Sometimes he passed bushes, leaves, and wet things, but there was no way of knowing in that kind of dream darkness.

The river cut through a line of shaggy Ponderosa pines. Most of the water ran over a series of rocks that once tumbled down from a shelf then collected, rounded out. Any light Mooney could see came from the slight shifts back and forth from collected streams of water wriggling over the rocks. Like they still caught sunlight. He wanted to touch one of the lines and see it undone.

That was when he noticed the bear. It was black; made of the same dark. It rose up out of the forest, its fur was the roughness of pines, its teeth the cut of scattered rocks, its eyes the black of a sky Mooney could only guess was there. A moonless night. It was hunting, or snatching up fish, more like.

Except Mooney couldn't see any fish. There weren't any fish. The bear waited.

Its mouth hung open, and its shoulders were bouldered like the stones around it.

A light quivered in the water, sloshed, and leapt upstream. The bear lowered its head and caught it, smacking. There was another light, and that one too, he lapped up. They were stars. Far away.

Mooney had to go; he turned to leave, but the river followed him everywhere, running around his shoes and soaking the soil, streaming through the trees in unbroken lines. The place flooded. Mooney was knee-deep, waist-deep, sinking in river. Everywhere he looked, bears caught stars in their mouths by the dozens. They grew bigger with each morsel, and light ran down their chins in streams like glowing milk.

A star popped in his mouth, then another, then another, then another.

“Make me a chef, Mooney,” Frank Nash said through his beak between bars.

Lucas had taken to leaning against the south wall of his cell right near the front where he could catch glimpses of Nash. He’d drug the gramophone over for easy access. It was spinning Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*, or at least the bits Warden Dick had cobbled together. The prelude was a hacked-up travesty, but after that, it wasn’t half bad. “You even cook?”

“I could,” Frank Nash said. “I have, I mean.” One of his arms slipped out the bars and waved back and forth. “I seen how close you two are. I know he gives you all this shit.”

Mooney retreated to look at the haggard discs.

“If there’s a hole out this place, it’s that warden. He’s been here too long. Getting soft.” The hand flapped around, pointed at Mooney’s cell. “Look at you. You’re two steps away from being an errand boy, and then you’re out. Gone. Open air.”

Had Mooney told Nash about that? He couldn’t remember. There’d been so many hunched-over lunches. Things got spat over porridge. He’d always been so careful about how he’d let on about him and Warden Dick; things was precarious enough as is. “What about that wall they’re about to knock in, huh?” Mooney said. The music stopped, and he leaned to flip the disc. It was a gap that landed him somewhere in act two. A duet, oh sweet love, a soft, flute-laden shift. “You ever think about *that* fucking hole?” he said to fill the silence.

“They chain your ankles, you think? While you work?”

“Most like.”

Frank Nash was quiet for a bit. The duet got tense; the flutes melded with oboes, strings, sharper things. “Let’s say you get this errand thing. Could you get a car?”

Mooney sighed. "Suppose I could steal one. If I get this errand thing you're talking about."

"How fast you think a man in chains could run, Mooney?"

"Not fast enough to outrun guns."

"Suppose labor conditions have grown tense. Unrest. Long hours swinging hammers in reckless conditions. People get upset."

"This ain't Leavenworth," Mooney said.

"Hell, there's a reason they use prison labor and not normal Joes from outside. This shit is what you'd call extra-legal. Just you wait." Nash sniffed and started running his fingers along the bars in time with the music, clunk, clunk, underneath Isolde. "Suppose I get a rise out everybody. Suppose fifty men with hammers and spades get angry against two thin stiffes with little guns. Suppose a man or two slips away and there's a nice new automobile waiting for him right over the fence, manned by the unsung Lucas Mooney."

"I ain't getting shot over this," Mooney said.

"No, you ain't. All you have to do is concentrate on sucking off Warden Dick till he lets you out for that fresh air."

Mooney folded his legs and placed his head against the wall. He rolled the nubs of his skull against the stone, back and forth. "That warden's a good man," he said.

"Probably," Frank Nash said. It got real quiet, and the rest of the song petered out. The violins played themselves into quiet pits. Mooney got to changing the disc. "I told you, I ain't fucking staying here," Nash said. He said it a lot, and he'd done a lot of staying there, so far.

"I know it," Mooney said. The next track leapt ahead again, some big bloody crescendo.

Frank Nash could say whatever he wanted, all locked up and crumpled. Nobody was leaving before Lucas Mooney.

Mooney stopped in the path, and countless bodies shuffled past him. They were men made of off-color cloth. It took some shouldering, but he made his way off the side of the mud-choked road. He could hear the river again, but no sounds like the slivering lights of swallowed stars. Only Mooney knew there was water. He went to the river where a wash of rocks cut through the waters. Beside the ford, was a small woman with eyes carved out of stone by sickles. She was wrapped in cloth and bent over the river where it was shallow, passable, a line of trickling stones and manageable streams of clear water. She had a basket. The canvas men had no idea; they never looked at her. Their march tore them onward. She was there for Lucas Mooney alone. The woman pulled cloth from her basket, and Mooney saw thick streams like oil come pouring down it. They were brown, crimson like day-old blood but too runny, too viscous. She thrashed the cloth in the river, and the oil began to churn and run. It slithered through the rocks. And she washed all the cloths, one by one, soiling the river like that. From her ankles ran an inky blackness that would stretch for miles downstream. Frank Nash was there beside him; their arms brushed. No one seemed to notice. They watched the woman—and she watched back icily—like a cottontail in debate to bolt. The water must have been frigid. After a time she went back to washing, and after a time they went back to marching through the dark.

A week later, Warden R. W. Dick took leave of his position as founder of the Oklahoma State Penitentiary and was replaced by Samuel J. Morley. Warden Morley liked to be Mr. Morley or sir. His office was what Lucas Mooney could only call austere—no rug, no books, no

thin breeze, nothing at all but the same spotless wooden desk plopped in the middle. Morley was the sort of man to fold his hands over his stomach. Flop them. Always found a reason to fidget with his teeth. He was running an institution, sitting office in his secular temple.

Warden Morley liked porkchops, so more often than not, Lucas Mooney was fixing porkchops. Three, four times a week he'd pan-fry porkchops. His only hopes were drowning Warden Morley's warped heart in gravy. It didn't work. His tolerance for greased-up milk fat was heroic.

That is to say, Lucas Mooney sure as shit wasn't going anywhere.

Frank Nash had it worse. His eyeballs were ready to drip right out his head, and his skin was tugging back at his bones. Mooney could hear him at night having fits, turning and hissing and moaning now and then, like a fever gripped him. His malnourishment spun out his hands—the porridge and soup most often went right through him, so he ate it less and less, to the point where his stomach was so worn down, every time they got their weekly beef, his body just threw it right back up, outright rejection, so he ate that less and less too. It was known men died dehydrated, shit every last bit of water out their bodies till they withered away or caught pneumonia or something on account of their bodies having no basis on which to fight. When Nash requested the switch to work on the new addition to the prison, he lasted about an hour knocking walls in with a sledgehammer before he fainted in the dust, sprained a wrist, and was dragged back to his cell, scraped, dirty, and bleary-eyed. They swapped him right back to the shoe shop: malnourished, unfit for work.

That is to say, Frank Nash was very much fucking sticking around.

But the reign of Warden Morley wasn't wholly despotic. After a few weeks, Lucas Mooney still found himself under the warden's wing. Could have been Warden Dick passed on

some words about Lucas' position in the prison, could have been his caliber of porkchops, or it could have been Mr. Morley just plain grew bored, but Lucas still wound up in his office at least five days a week, seated before that big oak desk while the warden took his supper. Samuel Morley was a newspaper man, always had it folded to his left when Mooney came in with his trays of meat and potatoes, meat and potatoes, meat and potatoes. The warden would give him a seat and lean the paper Mooney's way, and he'd pick it up and skim through it, real quiet, while the warden ate. Between tears of steaks and pork, Mooney's fingers hissed on thin paper. By the time the warden was done, Mooney would be about finished, and Morley would ask him, softly and chronologically, what he thought of sundry articles. It was mostly a way to boast his own opinions, which was fine, because Mooney didn't think much of the news either way. Each paper made the walls close a little bit more—some juxtaposition of out there, over there to right here, four walls and a greasy plate. Morley saw war coming, every day. Mooney didn't disagree.

About a month in, Mooney entered the office clutching a tray of shepherd's pie. Smearing the typical austerity, in the center of the desk, were a few records. Morley nodded at them, saying: "Heard you were some kind of listener and figured you could use some new stock. I played them to death already." Mooney set down the tray, slid into the seat and grabbed the music. A few were the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, and another was Billy Murray's recording of "Over There." He thumbed the cardboard and didn't know what to say, and told the warden so. "We really ought to update that dusty collection of yours. Probably bore somebody to death you keep playing them operas and whatnot." Warden Morley started to eat, so Mooney set the records aside, grabbed his paper and read quietly.

He spun the tracks one time each, and then never again. Warden Morley never brought any more music. Fair enough, fair enough.

One red, leaky morning Mooney woke up to a hissing Frank Nash. Mooney shuffled to the front of his cell and found Nash's beak craning out the bars. He looked sweaty, febrile, ready to run a hundred miles. "Mooney," he said quiet, "Mooney, I need your help. I had a dream."

Mooney put knuckles in his eyes. Lately he'd been sleeping like a corpse, all black and full and creamy sleep; he hadn't had a dream in a month or so. "That's great," he said.

"No," Nash muttered, "it isn't. You're the dream reader here, the man with the vision. I know how you sleep—this shit isn't for me." Mooney and Nash talked about dreams often enough, but Mooney never knew that Nash had been listening. Now, Nash's hands were shaking. "I have to tell you before I forget it. I'm sorry I woke you up."

"No you ain't."

"You're absolutely right. Shut up. Listen to me." Nash coughed, and phlegm rattled in his chest. "I find this tower, and it's on fire, and I know it's about to collapse. It's swaying, brick by brick. So without thinking I run up to this hellish thing, I put my hands on it and I try to hold it up, but it's so hot that the skin starts melting right off my bones. I'm pushing and burning, hoping people get the chance to run out, but they must have been trapped because bodies and screaming people start raining down all around me. They're all jumping out, burning and flapping. So by the time my arms were burnt down to the elbow I just said the hell with it and let the tower fall. The fire went out when it collapsed, but when I checked, everybody inside was already dead. Just like that. So I walked away. Job well done. I woke up like that."

"That's something," Mooney said.

"Look how goddamn sweaty my hands are," Nash said and flashed them out before wiping them heavy on his trousers. "The hell is all that about, Mooney?"

“You’re a violent man, Frank Nash.”

“Glad I ain’t paying you for this.”

“I don’t think you understand,” Mooney said and leaned on the wall. Light was filling the cell by the minute. “It’s out of your hands. There’s no helping it; you’ll hurt people around you. You’re the type of guy. It’s just got to be that way; there’s this violence, and it’s going to pull you through the world.” Like that, it was day. A full shard of sunlight breached the cell, and all the dawn colors leached out the room with the proper coming of the sun. “It’s going to pull you right out of here.”

“Violent,” Nash said. His hands were wrapped loosely around the bars, quivering, too weak to even grip the metal. “You ever dream something that was real?”

“It seems real when I dream it.”

“I mean it really happened. Or was going to happen.” Nash’s forehead slunk between bars and he looked at the floor, seeing something. “That river, in the dark.”

“Just a dream. Recurring dreams ain’t any more real. Just sharper, maybe.”

“You’re not listening. What if it’s real?” Nash’s head was rolling from bar to bar. “What if it will be? If you could go there, would you?”

Mooney pulled back in where Nash couldn’t see. Footsteps were clattering around the wing, an early shift lumbering their way. “I don’t follow you.”

“You can go there. I can help you go there.”

“Nash, this place is killing you.”

“Just fucking listen a minute.”

“You got to talk to the warden, Nash. You got to get some help; you can’t last another month like this. I’m shrinking, sure, but you’re withered to the root.”

Nash sighed—Mooney could hear him use his whole body to do it, or what was left of it. “I came in here a dead man, Mooney,” Nash said and backed away from the bars too, out of sight, tucked in the dawn. “You of all people should know that.”

Mooney lingered by the cell door and wondered how all these men lumped faith in him, piled on accidental authority. In that blank place, he’d become a receptacle, a man made carefully by other men. Who was to say what he should and shouldn’t know? What other boxes could he be backed into? It wasn’t enough to be locked up? To be the things he was forced to collect—records, letters, papers, moon phases, secondhand books, a series of ill-aimed requests? He could hear Nash moving, grunting, settling in his cot, no doubt aching and cold from sleep’s sweat. Too early for answers, too light out to go back to bed, Mooney wandered to the window and waited for the sunlight to rise up over the prison and strike a copse of trees off to the west, like a dark curtain peeling back across the bark. He thought about burning towers and black bears, and couldn’t help but wonder why the dreams came or went.

Mooney wrote another letter. It was about that time. Like always, he hiccupped on “Song to the Moon,” the words coming in fits. It was the way things had to go. Under his breath, he read it back:

“Sarah. I know I haven’t written in a while. I’ve been too tired all the time. I can’t sleep much. When I do, it’s half-awake, like I know I’m breathing. Like I’m counting all my breaths. And I haven’t had a dream in months. So I don’t have much to tell you about, there. Maybe it’s summer coming on, but this place gets smaller every day. The heat shrinks the walls. I don’t know.

“I try and think how I would tell you things. It’s what keeps me busy. I think, right now, if I had to tell her what all this is, everything I’m seeing and

being, how would I do that? A lot of the time I can't. A lot of the time I wouldn't be able to tell myself. It's like reading the same book over and over again, and then trying to tell the story to someone. They haven't read it, how would they know? It's all walls. That's as far as I've gotten. It's a series of walls. Some days that's harder than other days."

Every sentence rusted on Mooney's tongue. Every word was the wrong expression. He'd started too fast. Slow up, chew the pen, let the music run down.

The track ended, and he went to flip it, but when he did, he saw two guards headed his way. When men came to fetch, Mooney paid attention. They made for Nash's cell, opened it up silently, and led the bony man out. He'd lost a pound of hair—all that was left was a crown running around the base of his skull. Nash didn't look back at Mooney. He hadn't grinned in weeks. It looked like the guards could have tossed him across the room. They lifted him gently by the elbows.

So good—Nash was getting help. Good good.

Mooney went back to work, pen to tooth.

"I guess I'm writing because I won't be here much longer. Maybe that's why the dreams stopped. I can't tell you how I know, but I know. Soon enough, I'm leaving. I don't know if I'll see you. If I do, it won't be soon. Don't ask me how I know that either.

"Everything's okay, I promise. I just get the feeling I won't be able to come straight back. It couldn't be that easy.

"By my math—"

Mooney leapt out of his cot, slapped the notepad against the wall and ran a line through his last three words. Chewing on his lip, he scratched over them: "I love you." He held the pad up: fucked. The words ran together, created new meaningless tangled symbols. Pressing with his whole body, he tore up the words with more ink, scratched them to bits, but when he looked again he could still see the words lurking, by my math, I love you, so thickly etched into the paper. Fucked. He walked around his cell, wanting to tear and tear, but he'd never wasted a paper before, not once. The black mess swelled. He folded the letter, unfolded it, slapped the wall with an open palm. By my math, I love you.

The track ended, Mooney switched the disc, and the prince arrived, hoorah hoorah, but Frank Nash did not. Mooney told himself he could fix things, sat down on the floor next to his gramophone and crossed his legs. He gripped the paper in his hand, bit the end of his pen like a cigarette, and bounced it up and down on his lips.

Things had to go this way. Mooney had always been so deliberate. *Always* been so deliberate.

Tracks spun into more tracks, and still Mooney sat. Every now and then, he'd feel an ache and realize how far he'd slumped, straightened up, good for the spine, sure, only to find himself slouched again, God knows how much time passed. The paper got looser in his hand. Any thoughts he might have had were smothered. The letter grew into some arcane language, and Mooney sat and listened to empty, silent songs. This is how he slept, and how he stayed awake.

After a time he heard boots slapping through the hall and saw Frank Nash being led back. His head hung—it hung a lot, no energy in a thin neck to keep that nose lifted. Nash was quiet, looking at the floor. Collapsible.

When the guards left and the prison grew quiet, Mooney heard Nash shuffle up to the bars. They both waited for the track to end before they spoke. Mooney folded his paper and slid it under his thigh. It became gone, nonexistent.

“Lucas Mooney,” Frank Nash said, “how much do you love your country?”

Mooney shrugged even though he knew nobody could see it. “I don’t know so much about love.”

He could hear Nash itching himself. Nash took a long breath, a bit of a rattle at the top of it. “I had a talk with the warden,” Nash said.

“He going to do something about your—” Mooney paused, fished a bit. “Condition?”

“Bit more than something,” Nash said. There was a light in his voice. A fire in it. Something was burning; Mooney could sniff it, if he wanted. “Lucas Mooney, you and me are going to France.”

“Beg pardon?”

“We’re going to fight the good fight,” Nash said. Mooney heard him stand up. “I got it all fixed. Evidently, liberty and democracy conquer all in this glorious nation, right down to murder charges.”

Mooney put his hands on his thighs, slid them on the floor, found them sweaty, and wiped them on his pants. He grunted a bit.

“Leave by the end of the month. I found the hole, Mooney,” Nash said. “I found that hole we been looking for.”

“So that’s it?” Mooney said. “I’m going to war?”

“Yee-haw,” Frank Nash said, and as Mooney heard it ring, he could hear the truth of Frank Nash in it, vibrating.

So that was it.

There wasn't much else to say—Mooney sat for a while, and they let the rest of *Rusalka* play out, because somehow or other it seemed appropriate. There weren't plans to make. The walls stayed in place; nothing had changed. Mooney pawed through records, counted his breaths, and saw the sun come down just out of view of his window. Past spring equinox, the disk hugged the prison wall where he couldn't watch it die in the little arms of distant trees. Things had been out of line for a while. No matter, really. Mooney was going to war.

After the opera ended, Mooney took the folded letter, smoothed out the paper and put it with the others, a stack tall enough to get a book out of. Most had crinkled from the humidity and were pressed down by an untouched Bible. He looked at the stack in the dying light; no matter at all.

Lucas Mooney went to bed early and slept, complete, thick and dreamy.

The water, of course, was black. Everything was black, all around—the wet seeped up from the ground in thick puddles, unholy. Wind passed through the trees and jiggled the scattered pools. There were lights in the distance and the heavy thumping of explosions, air routinely sucked into a vacuum and rearranged—space swallowing itself. Pockets of the black constantly reinvented themselves. Sometimes they collapsed nearer, sometimes farther.

Mooney stood in a road, mostly gutted, beyond which a line of trees multiplied into a thin wood of birches with slim trunks, black leaves. They slid up into a shaggy hill in the distance, something that needed to be climbed. This was dream logic—climb the mountain, open the door, press further into the dark. But Mooney stood still, as footsteps splashed by unattached to feet, just a series of squelches and pitters moving with the breeze. Shells erupted somewhere. The sky

was tearing itself open in concentric circles moving in, choking the tree-crested hill. Above it, the moon. It was high, at its apex, peering through a thin layer of cloud like a sigh.

Mooney knew there had been shouting, running, bullets smacking into trees. In the scarred, muddy road it didn't matter. The hill reached out for the moon.

Something rustled in the tree line, and a man emerged, tattered, torn, walking forward at a regular pace with his rifle bayonet fixed in front of him. Blood covered his forearms, was smeared in purposeful lines across his cheek and clavicle, and soaked a good part of his stomach and thighs. Mooney wasn't afraid, and the moonlight grew brighter. It was Frank Nash. Of course it was.

"Yankee doodle do or die," Nash said. He leaned on his rifle. One of his eyebrows was missing, and several slashes ran up his right arm.

Mooney couldn't speak. It felt sacrosanct.

"I've just had the most wonderful idea, Lucas Mooney," Frank Nash said. He placed a soiled hand on Mooney's limp shoulder.

Mooney could feel himself moving outside his body. The trees were thinning at the same rate. Artillery thundered.

"You're good with people, I can see. And I," Nash said, "I'm enigmatic." He held his bloody palms upward. Behold. "What we need is a business endeavor stateside to keep us occupied, out of trouble."

What? What is it?

Frank Nash took his helmet off. A shell collided with a tree nearby, sent it into screaming splinters.

"You and me, Lucas Mooney—we're going to crack safes."

And, truly, they Yankee Doodle did.

The ground continued to seep up in increasing streams. The earth was leaking. Mooney looked at the circle in the sky.